

WORKING PAPER SERIES

CEEApIA WP No. 19/2011

The Importance of Small Sporting Events in Regional Tourism: The Case of the Azores International Bridge Festival

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July 2011

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RESUMO/ABSTRACT

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**THE IMPORTANCE OF SMALL SPORTING EVENTS IN REGIONAL
TOURISM: THE CASE OF THE AZORES INTERNATIONAL BRIDGE
FESTIVAL**

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the XIII Azores International Bridge Festival in Ponta Delgada, São Miguel Island, which was held October 1-5, 2009. A questionnaire was administered to all players; 89 surveys were completed, resulting in a 78% response rate. The perception of the event's features was also observed through the analysis of various categorically ordered variables included in the questionnaire. Factors significantly affecting the probabilities of dependent class variables (attributes) were examined using the ordinal regression model. The results indicated that this event generated several benefits for the city, favoring the local commerce for at least five days through expenditures from tourists. In addition, the event provided guests with the opportunity to visit other islands, taking advantage of their participation in the festival, further demonstrating the ability to retain some players. This event can be viewed as another seasonal peak mitigation tool for the city of Ponta Delgada, promoting an increase in demand for tourist structures.

SPORTS AND RELATED TOURISM EVENTS

Events can be broadly defined as an activity or occurrence that takes place. Usually some importance is attributed to the event, such as the celebration of an important happening or a ceremony. Events can vary from primarily local activities to international spectacles attracting participants from the entire world. Communities gain more than pleasure from such festivals and events; they also experience economic benefits. As a result, events have become important factors in strategic development plans for regions across the globe (Whitford, 2004).

According to Veloso (2007), an event is always the opposite of a vulgar occurrence because it falls within the field of special, extraordinary, and transcendental happenings. Therefore, demand for events organized with quality and professionalism continues to increase. In recent decades, more regions have shown an interest in promoting important sporting events, which are considered to be vectors of economic and touristic development. According to Pons, Murali and Nyeck (2006), modern consumers frequently spend large sums of money to participate in sporting events, including the consumption of goods and services related to the sports. Even small-scale sporting events, as indicated by Lamont and Dowell (2008), have demonstrated the ability to generate a set of benefits for the communities hosting these events, such as an influx of cash in the local economy through guests' spending, mitigation of seasonal peaks, increased demand for touristic structures (e.g., restaurants, accommodations, and attractions), and incentives for future trips.

Sporting events as a tourism factor

Tourism involves a phase of deep transformation. People travel to engage in novel experiences beyond merely viewing sights or engaging in resting opportunities. According to Gibson (1998), several types of special interest tourism have become

increasingly popular in recent years, including trips related to sports or sports tourism. Hinch and Higham (2001) defined sports tourism as tourism-based travel away from the home environment for a limited time, whereby the sport is defined by a unique set of rules and the competition is related to physical fitness and playful nature.

The sports tourism event is a growing global industry with important economic implications for the sport, the event, and the benefits related to the impact on the travel to and tourism of hosting destinations (Cassidy, 2005). The demand for sports tourism throughout the world has been increasing in recent years due to a greater emphasis on health and fitness along with an increase in cities' adoption of sporting events in order to attract sports tourists (Herstein, 2008).

According to Devine and Devine (2005), the simplest form of sports tourism generally involves sports as a casual and informal part of a vacation, eventually becoming part of the vacation planning for many years. However, increasing evidence indicates that sports are now considered an important factor of vacations in general, if not the most relevant aspect. As a result, many resorts, touristic destinations, and countries are specifically promoting sports opportunities. To World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) (2001), the spending of tourists is not limited to hotel occupancy; part of the available income is also destined to a large variety of services, excursions, and various activities, favoring increased demand in the recipient country or region that otherwise would not exist. According to Wood (2005), local authorities resort to events and festivals in order to achieve a variety of social and economic objectives. However, the success of such events, which can leverage tourism, entertainment, or arts, and the cultural budget are rarely studied in a systemic and objective manner.

Objectives, benefits, and importance of events

According to Macpherson (1997), tourism represents a source of renewed health for many communities, offering a particularly effective tool for rural economies. In addition to economic rewards, events contribute to an increased quality of life in a community, becoming a source of pride and prominence in the local society. Macpherson concluded that events have become the fastest growing touristic attraction. According to Litvin *et al.* (2006), from a community point of view, festival-based tourism can generate significant economic benefits, contributing to local businesses (e.g., hotels and restaurants) while generally requiring little investment as it makes use of existing infrastructure.

Sporting events not only bring tangible monetary returns for local trade, but also advertise the area to potential visitors and entrepreneurs (Haug, Krabbenhoft, and Tippins, 2004). Lamont and Dowell (2008) stated that the benefits associated with sports tourism include the construction or renovation of infrastructures, increased employment, the advertisement of cultures, and commercial activity. In addition to these benefits, sports tourism also provides opportunities for all social levels—particularly organizers, advertisers, volunteers, and entrepreneurs—to work together for a common goal. Sports tourism can be a profitable business when properly developed and promoted (Devine and Devine, 2005). However, in order to attract foreign tourists in this increasingly competitive environment, each destination has to differentiate its touristic product and develop market niches.

Like all forms of special interest travel, sports tourism has to be approached from both a supply and a demand perspective (Getz, 2008). A consumerist approach requires determining who travels to the events and for what reason as well as who participates in the events when traveling. In addition, it is necessary to identify which tourists spend money on the event and how they spend this money. Meanwhile, the demand

perspective includes a study of the value of events in promoting the positive image of the destination and the general marketing of the area. Regarding supply, destinations develop infrastructures and promote events of all kinds to meet several objectives: (1) attract tourists (especially out of season); (2) serve as catalyst (for urban renovation and to increase the capacity of local infrastructure and tourism); and (3) contribute to the local marketing and liven up attractions or local areas.

When strong seasonal variations are part of the normal annual cycle of a tourism destination, a disruption may occur in the social and economic order if the government and tourism managers fail to adopt proper countermeasures. The low season represents a situation where supply exceeds demand, while the high season is defined by excessive demand. During the low season, low occupation rates result in a decrease of business, subsequently reflecting negatively on the economy due to the multiplier effect. The local government can resort to many strategies to handle this period—namely, by developing incentives for the local inhabitants along with attractions and activities that can attract guests during low seasons (Weaver and Lawton, 2002).

Bridge as a sporting event

The management of the *Clube de Bridge de S. Miguel—CBSM* (S. Miguel Bridge Club) realized early on that bridge was not a sport limited to local residents only, but an event full of potential to promote a quality sport and simultaneously contribute to the revitalization of the city of Ponta Delgada, promoting regional tourism and encouraging the coming of tourists through the sport. One of the relevant aspects of bridge lays in the fact that the festival provides five days of competition and another five or more days of opportunities for the local economy, unlike other sports in which eliminated players immediately leave the host city or their stay on the island is limited to just one night.

Some players take the opportunity to stay longer than the period dedicated to the event in the region/city where it takes place, some are accompanied by family, and others travel with friends. During bridge competitions in Ponta Delgada, attendees have time to enjoy the island's tourism, including food, surf, golf, hiking, whale watching, sailing, and canoeing as well as organized tours. Such aspects influence tourism agencies and entrepreneurs economically, particularly in the revitalization, hotel, transportation, purchase, entertainment, and cultural sectors (UNWTO, 2001).

In addition, certain situations involve the recurring participation of the players, be they domestic or foreign. Over the years, some players have taken advantage of their participation in the festival to see the other islands in the Azores, benefitting from the usually pleasant environmental conditions at the time of the event, which typically takes place the first week of October. In a season considered to be medium-low for tourism, the community seeks to use sports to help minimize the resulting negative impacts.

In order to meet these objectives, the CBSM dedicates itself to the management of international festivals. This article aims to study the *XIII Festival Internacional de Bridge dos Açores* (XIII International Bridge Festival of the Azores), which took place in 2009.

METHOD

According to Hinch and Higham (2001), “*The concepts of tourism and sports are clearly related. Sports are an important activity in tourism and tourism is a fundamental characteristic of sports.*” Their study found that these two mobilizing concepts have converged over time, sharing activities, contexts, and practices in common. The relation between both sectors of activity has earned the attention of many researchers examining local events, sporting events, and sports tourism events regarding

their ability to mobilize a community, country, or region in terms of attracting new participants/visitors and the economic impact they might cause.

The current study seeks to contribute to the existing research relevant to small sporting events in the economy and regional tourism by using a case study—namely, the XIII International Bridge Festival of the Azores, which took place on the S. Miguel Island in October 2009. This study focused on the perception of participants in this festival with respect to the features of the event, including management (*ABSM—Associação de Bridge de S. Miguel*, translated as S. Miguel Association of Bridge), as well as verifying guests' expenses. To this end, the main concepts of tourist expenditures were included—namely, (1) accommodations; (2) food; (3) transportation; (4) entertainment; (5) shopping; and (6) others (UNWTO, 2001).

The statistical analysis used the PASW 18.0 (Predictive Analytics SoftWare), designed by SPSS. The license was obtained from the SPSS website (<http://spss.com>). Statistical methods were used to manage the data collected from the questionnaire, including the descriptive statistics and the ordinal regression model.

Ordinal Regression Model

A study of different ordered categorical variables was included in the questionnaire to assess participants' perceptions regarding the presented features. The goal was to examine these perceptions based on demographic characteristics, among other factors. Therefore, using a similar approach as with dependent variables, the event's features are presented as ordinal variables, using multivariate statistics to estimate an ordinal regression model in order to identify factors explaining the variations in respondents' evaluation. The ordinal regression model (also called PLUM) can construct models, produce forecasting, and study the importance of dependent variables in cases where the dependent variable is ordinal.

DATA AND RESULT ANALYSIS

Descriptive Statistics

No sample was defined *a priori* according to the formal sampling methods since the objective was to investigate the entire target universe. The scope of this universe encompassed 114 event participants. The questionnaires were distributed to all players; 89 completed questionnaires were returned, resulting in a response rate of approximately 78%.

Characterization of the sample

The majority of participants (32.5%) fell within the 51 to 65 years old range, followed by the 20 to -25 years old (16.9%), and 26 to 35 years old as well as 36 to 50 years old, which each accounted for 19.1%.

In addition, participants' gender might have some influence on the study results as 63 of the participants were male, representing 70.8% of the sample. Respondents were primarily residents of continental Portugal (68% of the sample). This result is in line with tourism publications from January to June 2010 (Azores Regional Statistics Service - SREA). Tourists from Portugal continue to be the most frequent guests of the Azores, representing 50% of all visitors.

The bridge festival is more than a competition; it is a sport with unique features that merge competition with moments of leisure and exploration of the S. Miguel Island. In this context, it is common for players to be accompanied during their visit, by people such as friends and family. Indeed, 47.9% of the participants in this study were accompanied by others; although their companions were not players, they still participated in the event as observers or spectators, thereby contributing to the increase in tourist spending. Among the accompanied participants, 67.7% had one companion

while 17.6% traveled with three additional people. Multiplying these data by the number of companions per attendance indicates that, in addition to the 114 participants, 61 associates accompanied participants, leading to at least 175 visitors given that not all players provided data.

Just more than half (57%) of the participants had visited the Azores before. The S. Miguel Island was a new destination for 43% of the respondents. These results indicate that the event is capable of not only retaining players, but also attracting new participants. Furthermore, approximately 86% of the sample spent 5 to 7 days at the destination. In fact, 61.6% stayed longer than the days required for the event (i.e., 5 days), indicating that some participants took advantage of the travel opportunity to stay a few more days on the island as well as possibly visiting a few other islands in the Azores. Furthermore, 75% of the participants showed interest in visiting another island of the archipelago, and 36.1% had already visited another island in the Azores. Thus, the sporting event in question not only serves as a bridge to visiting the other islands, but also encourages return trips. Regarding estimated expenditures, participants noted that they spent the most money (i.e., 401€ or more) on hotels and flight tickets. This result is not surprising as such expenditures are consistently high.

Participants' perceptions of the attributes of the event were positive. Access to the location had the highest average (5.69). In addition, general management, attractiveness, and access to the location were defined as good or very good by more than 50% of the participants. However, the data also indicated weaker attributes. Media information had the lowest average (3.92). More than 38% of participants rated media information and online information as very bad, bad, or lacking. Such results indicate the need to provide greater investments in advertising the event, either through the media or the internet.

Ordinal Regression Model

Table 1 indicates lists those independent variables that significantly affected significantly the likelihood of a specific response (i.e., very bad, bad, lacking, neutral, satisfactory, good, very good) for each dependent variable.

Table 1. Variables used in the ordinal regression model.

Dependent Variables (attributes of the event)	Independent variables
(10.1) General management	(Q1) Gender
(10.2) Social events	(Q2) Age
(10.3) Media information	(Q4) Are you accompanied for the trip
(10.4) Online information	(Q5) How many are travelling with you
(10.5) Information on the location	(Q6) Is it the first trip to S. Miguel
(10.6) Attractiveness	(Q7) How long will you stay in the archipelago
(10.7) Access to the location	(Q8) Have you visited any other Azores island
(10.8) Support infrastructure	(Q8.2) Do you plan on visiting

The study used the Ordinal Regression Model to achieve the following objectives:

- (1) Test the likelihood ratio (LR). If the *p-value* is lower than 0.05, the null hypothesis must be rejected. This means that at least one independent variable significantly affects the likelihood of the dependent variable;
- (2) Apply Pearson's chi-square test (χ^2_{Pearson}). If the *p-value* is higher than 0.05, the null hypothesis is not rejected, implying that the model fits the data; and
- (3) Study the framework of the estimated parameters and verify which independent variables significantly affect the likelihood of dependent class variables. This situation is achievable when the *p-value* is lower than 0.05.

The calculation of regression coefficients is used to infer the significance of independent variables on the likelihood of dependent class variables (strictly on the link of accumulated likelihood). Since the *Logit* function was applied to this study, the model can be written as (Maroco, 2007):

$$\text{Ln} \left[\frac{P\{Y_j \leq k\}}{P\{Y_j > k\}} \right] = \alpha_k - \beta X_j$$

General management

The results (summarized in Table 2) indicate that three independent variables (Q6[0], Q7, and Q8.2[0]) significantly affect the likelihood of dependent variable classes. Regarding variable Q6, the model demonstrates that from the class No (0) to the omitted reference class (Yes), the Ln of the likelihood of observing a class of lower order compared to a higher class decreases by 1.787. Compared to the class Yes, the lower dependent class variables (negative perception) of the class No are less likely to occur than the classes of higher order (positive perception), revealing that the respondents who are not visiting the S. Miguel island for the first time have a positive opinion of the general management.

Table 2. General management: Estimated parameters.

Independent Variables	Estimated Parameters	
	Regression Coefficients (β)	<i>p</i> -value (for a significance level of 5%)
<i>(Q6) Is it the first trip to S. Miguel (0-no; 1-yes)</i> (Q6=0)	1.787	0.022
<i>(Q7) How long will you stay in the archipelago</i> (Q8.2) <i>Do you plan on visiting (any other Azores island)</i> (Q8.2=0)	-0.961	0.001
	1.709	0.031
RV		0.023
χ^2		0.498

For variable Q7, when the number of days the sports tourists spend at the event increase, the Ln from the likelihood of a class of lower order—compared to that of a higher class—increases by 0.961, meaning that the likelihood of classes of higher order decreases as the number of days increases when compared to the classes of lower order. In other words, we can say that the positive perception regarding the general management decreases as the number of days increases.

Regarding variable Q8.2, we can attest that, between class No and the omitted reference class (Yes), the likelihood Ln of observing a class of lower order in relation to a class of higher order decreases by 1.709. This situation reveals that the respondents who not intend to visit at least another island of the archipelago show a positive perception regarding the general management.

Social events

The *p-value* for Pearson's chi-square test equals 0.000, which is inferior to the significance level. Thus, it is possible to reject the null hypothesis that the model adjusts itself to the data.

Media information

The global quality of the model adjustment is verified before the analysis of the statistically significant regression coefficients. The model presents four variables significantly affecting the likelihood of classes from the dependent variable (see Table 3).

Table 3. Media information: Estimated parameters.

Independent Variables	Estimated Parameters	
	Regression Coefficients (β)	<i>p-value</i> (for a significance level of 5%)
<i>(Q1) Gender (0-female; 1-male)</i> (Q1=0)	-1.484	0.046
<i>(Q2) Age</i> (Q2.4=0)	2.789	0.043
<i>(Q6) Is it the first trip to S. Miguel (0-no; 1-yes)</i> (Q6=0)	2.316	0.004
<i>(Q7) How long will you stay in the archipelago</i>	-0.791	0.004
RV		0.000
χ^2		0.926

Regarding variable Q1, we can confirm that between the Female class and the omitted reference class (Male), the Ln of the likelihood of a class of lower order

compared to a class of higher order increases by 1.484. Thus, the greater the number of female respondents, the weaker the examination regarding media information.

Regarding variable Q2, we observed that between class No and the omitted reference class (Yes), the Ln of the likelihood of a class of lower order decreases by 2.789. Therefore, the greater the number of respondents outside the 36- to 50-year-old range, the better the assessment of the media information of the event.

Concerning variable Q6, we can affirm that between class No and the omitted reference class (Yes), the Ln of the likelihood of a class of lower order decreases by 2.316. Between class No and class Yes, the classes of lower order from the dependent variable (negative perception) are less likely than the classes of higher order (positive perception), revealing that the respondents who are not visiting the S. Miguel Island for the first time have a positive opinion of the existing media information of the event.

Regarding variable Q7, when the number of days the sports tourist spends at the event increases, the Ln of the likelihood of a class of lower order—compared to that of a higher class—increases by 0.791. In other words, the likelihood of classes of higher order compared to the classes of lower order decreases as the number of days increases. Thus, as the number of days increases, the positive perception of the existing information decreases.

Online information

Once the overall quality and adjustment of the model (LR and Pearson's chi-square test) were verified, we analyzed the statistically significant regression coefficients (see Table 4). The model presents three variables that significantly affect the likelihood of dependent class variables: Q6, Q7, and Q8.2.

Table 4. Online information: Estimated parameters.

Independent Variables	Estimated Parameters	
	Regression Coefficients (β)	<i>p</i> -value (for a significance level of 5%)
<i>(Q6) Is it the first trip to S. Miguel (0-no; 1-yes)</i> (Q6=0)	2.482	0.002
<i>(Q7) How long will you stay in the archipelago</i> (Q8.2) Do you plan on visiting (any other Azores island) (Q8.2=0)	-0.65	0.014
	1.802	0.023
RV		0.014
χ^2		0.577

For Q6, between class No and the omitted reference class (Yes), the Ln of the likelihood of a class of lower order decreases by 2.482. Between class No and class Yes, the classes of lower order from the dependent variable (negative perception) are less likely than the classes of higher order (positive perception), revealing that the respondents who are not visiting the S. Miguel Island for the first time have a positive opinion of the existing online information related to the event.

Meanwhile, the analysis of Q7 responses demonstrated that, when the number of days the tourists spend at the sporting event increases, the Ln of the likelihood of a class of lower order—compared to that of a higher class—increases by 0.65. In other words, as the number of days increases, the likelihood of classes of higher order compared to the classes of lower order decreases. Thus, we can conclude that, as the number of days increases, the positive perception of the online information decreases.

Finally, regarding variable Q8.2, when the number of respondents without plans to visit another island increases, the Ln of the likelihood of a class of lower order compared to a higher class decreases by 1.802. In other words, when the number of respondents without plans to visit another island increases, so does the classification of the online information dependent variable.

Information on the location

As Table 5 indicates, the *p-value* of the LR test is higher than the significance level. Therefore, we cannot reject the null hypothesis that the estimated coefficients are not statistically significant. In other words, the coefficients are null.

Table 5. Information on the location of the event: Estimated parameters

	Estimated Parameters
	<i>p-value</i> (for a significance level of 5%)
RV	0.137
χ^2	0.379

Attractiveness

Since the *p-value* (0.491) of the LR test is higher than the significance level (see Table 6), we cannot reject the null hypothesis that the estimated coefficients are not statistically significant, meaning that the coefficients are null.

Table 6. Attractiveness of the event: Estimated parameters

	Estimated Parameters
	<i>p-value</i> (for a significance level of 5%)
RV	0.491
χ^2	0.360

Access to the location of the event

The *p-value* for the likelihood ratio test was 0.401 (see Table 7), which does not allow for rejecting the null hypothesis that the coefficients are null.

Table 7. Access to the event's location: Estimated parameters

	Estimated Parameters
	<i>p-value</i> (for a significance level of 5%)
RV	0.401
χ^2	0.849

Support infrastructure

The *p-value* of the likelihood ratio test is higher than the significance level (see Table 8), which prevents the rejection of the null hypothesis that the coefficients are null.

Table 8. Support infrastructure: Estimated parameters

	Estimated Parameters
	<i>p-value</i> (for a significance level of 5%)
RV	0.057
χ^2	0.294

CONCLUSIONS

Small-scale sporting events have demonstrated the ability to generate a number of benefits to the host communities, including the influx of cash into the local economy from tourist spending, the mitigation of seasonal peaks, the increase of demand for tourist-related businesses (e.g., restaurants, hotels), and encouragement to make future trips. Both public and private sectors have invested in sports tourism events in order to promote their location or region and attract more tourists, especially outside of high seasons. In fact, many tourist destinations have the capacity to provide services and products all year. However, in many destinations, high seasonality contributes to very irregular sales distribution.

In addition to being an instrument to mitigate the seasonal effects, sporting events not only bring tangible monetary returns to the local commerce, but also advertise the area to potential guests and entrepreneurs. Tourists' spending is not limited to accommodations; it also includes a large variety of services, tours, and various activities, thereby promoting an increased demand in the region or host country that would otherwise not exist. In addition, sports tourism events are inexpensive as they rely on the community's existing infrastructure.

The sports tourism event examined in this study is the XIII International Bridge Festival of the Azores, hosted in Ponta Delgada, S. Miguel, on October 1-5, 2009. According to the literature and the results displayed, we can conclude this event brought benefits to the city, promoting the local market for at least five days based on tourists' expenses. Furthermore, the event provided an opportunity for guests to see other islands, taking advantage of their participation in the festival, which also showed the ability to create loyal players. Thus, this event can be perceived as another mitigation tool for addressing seasonal peaks in Ponta Delgada, promoting an increased demand for tourism structures.

In the second phase of this study, the ordinal regression model was used to assess respondents' perceptions of the dependant variables. Of the eight variables, global and quality adjustment was verified for only three variables: general management, media information, and online information. Independent variables Q6(0) and Q7 influenced these three dependent variables. Respondents who were not on their first trip to S. Miguel showed positive perceptions regarding general management, media information, and online information about the event. Concerning variable Q7, we may conclude that a longer stay in the archipelago leads to respondents' more negative perception of general management as well as the media information and online information; in other words, a greater length of stay gives tourists more time to spot inefficiencies.

It is necessary for public and private entities to continue supporting bridge as they have always done. Properly organized events can boost the city, location, region, as well as country.

Limitations

It is important to note this study's limitations. The first limitation relates to the representativeness of the sample, which was meant to include all players who

participated in the event. Despite our efforts, we failed to obtain any responses from Spanish players. Furthermore, the questionnaire was not applied to all participants (i.e., players and companions). Another important limitation was the difficulty of incorporating significantly influential factors on the intended results in this kind of study. Finally, no longitudinal study of the event in question has been conducted, nor have any studies examined small sporting events and their relevance to the city of Ponta Delgada. Thus, comparisons of the results and conclusions cannot be made.

Future Research Avenues

Given the existing limitations, future studies should be conducted to address these issues. The recommendations we considered of greatest relevance fall mainly in the formulation of questions in the questionnaire that could assess the economic impact of the event in the host location and the introduction of new, significantly influential factors on the results. The use of this methodology is recommended for other events of similar nature on the island, making it possible to confirm these results in future studies. Finally, it is of full interest to both public and private entities to study events that may bring more benefits to the island in order to improve the marketing strategy of the destination as well as the time to coordinate a more incisive event management.

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